

How I killed the author I idolised, by fighter pilot

By Ian Sparks

A GERMAN fighter ace has just learned that one of his 28 wartime 'kills' was his favourite author.

Messerschmitt pilot Horst Rippert, 88, said he would have held his fire if he had known the man flying the Lightning fighter was renowned French novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

The Luftwaffe veteran said he only recently discovered whom he had killed during the aerial combat over the southern French coast in July 1944.

He said: 'If I had known it was Saint-Exupery I would never have shot him down. I loved his books. I knew he was a French pilot, but he was probably my favourite author at the time.'

'When it happened, he was below me. I saw his markings, manoeuvred myself behind him and shot him down.'

Flying fanatic and novelist Saint-Exupery published eight books before his death, including *The Little Prince* - about a pilot who crashes in the desert and meets a boy from outer space - which has been translated into more than 50 languages.

He was one of France's best-loved writers of the pre-war years, and has a plaque commemorating his life in Paris's Pantheon Cathedral.

Rippert gunned down 28 Allied planes during the war before going on to become a sports journalist in his native Germany. He only found



Regret: Luftwaffe pilot Horst Rippert

out about the pilot he had killed when he was contacted earlier this year by historian Luc Vanrell, who is writing a biography of Saint-Exupery.

Rippert added: 'I am shocked and sorry. Who knows what other great books he would have gone on to write.'

For decades, mystery surrounded



Target: Antoine de Saint-Exupery in the Free French air force

the disappearance of 44-year-old Saint-Exupery who had been a pioneering long-distance airmail pilot in the 1930s and 40s as well as a writer.

He fled to New York when Germany invaded France but returned later to Europe to join the Free French air force. He was serving with a reconnaissance squadron

based in Corsica when he failed to return from a mission to prepare for the landing of the Allies in southern France. Then in 1998, his bracelet was found in a fisherman's net off Marseille.

Vanrell later found remains of his Lightning fighter on the seabed. It was brought to the surface and identified from serial numbers.